

VZCZCXRO1069
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #5429/01 3551044
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 211044Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2664
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0277
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 005429

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/20/2016

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN ACTIVIST ANWAR BUNNI IN COURT; EU REP TO DAMASCUS?

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Roebuck for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Prominent Syrian human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni appeared briefly December 19 in Damascus Criminal Court on charges connected to his signature on a document calling for improved Syria-Lebanon relations, as well as for involvement with a European Commission-funded human rights center. Bunni's trial was postponed again until January, most likely due to SARG hesitation about the potential negative publicity of a conviction, according to family friends and observers. A European Commission official attending the trial separately noted to Poloff that EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana was considering a visit to Syria and that an EU human rights demarche would soon be delivered to the SARG. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Bunni appeared in criminal court December 19 for his first public court appearance since his arrest in May. Bunni, who was dressed in civilian clothes (and not striped prison garb), looked drawn and tired but smiled broadly at his wife, family members, friends, lawyers and diplomatic observers who attended his two-minute appearance before the judges. Bunni's trial was postponed until January 21 because the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor failed to send a witness to testify against Bunni.

¶3. (C) Bunni first appeared in court on May 21 shortly after his arrest and was interrogated by investigatory judges along with three other signatories of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration (DBD). At that time, Bunni was interrogated solely about his involvement with a European Commission (EC)-funded human rights center, while the other three activists were questioned about their involvement with the DBD. The most serious of the five charges against the men include weakening national feelings and provoking sectarian divisions, which can carry up to a life sentence. According to human rights lawyers at the time of the interrogations, Bunni was also charged with conspiring with a foreign power and belonging to a secret organization attempting to overthrow the state. Bunni more recently appeared on November 20 in a closed court session (which was attended by diplomatic observers) where he refused to enter a plea when re-interrogated about the charges against him.

¶4. (C) While waiting for the December 19 court appearance to begin, Poloff spoke to Loic Lallemand Zeller, head of the political and economic section at the Delegation of the European Commission, about EU-Syria relations. Zeller said a group of European parliamentarians had recently visited Syria, conveying to Syrian officials such as Deputy PM for

Economic Affairs Abdullah Dardari and FM Walid Mu'allim the importance of human rights improvements as a precondition for the conclusion of the EU-Syrian Association Agreement. Dardari responded that the EU had "missed its chance," as the Association Agreement would have provided the framework for human rights improvements.

¶5. (C) Zeller also speculated that EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana may travel to Damascus in the near future, quoting Solana as saying that, given all of the other European recent trips to Damascus, he didn't see what difference his own visit would make. Zeller did not know about timing of a Solana trip, noting, however, that it was unlikely to occur before mid-January. (Comment: Zeller's speculation that the EU's Solana may soon visit Syria reflects a change from six weeks ago when Zeller downplayed the idea. It follows, however, with Zeller's comments at that time that "Syria was back on the EU agenda.")

¶6. (C) Zeller also noted that the EU had finally received a requested appointment at the MFA to deliver a human rights-related demarche. The Finnish Ambassador, the German Charge and he would deliver the demarche to the MFA's Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs Ahmad Arnous, Zeller said. It was still unclear whether the demarche would be made public.

¶7. (C) Comment: Bunni's lawyers were not sure about the reason behind the continued delay in the activist's trial, commenting that the SARG should logically be able to ensure timely testimony of Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor officials. Family friends and other Syrians in attendance, such as opposition leader Riad Seif, commented later, however, that the SARG was probably delaying Bunni's trial

DAMASCUS 00005429 002 OF 002

and that of other political prisoners such as detained Syrian intellectual Michel Kilo for fear that convictions would bring negative publicity.
ROEBUCK